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# A Conversation Wrought in Loss: Exploring the Magical Reality of Rabisankar Bal's Dozakhnama

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**Abstract:**

Historically, Bengali literature has been acclaimed for its richness of fiction as well as poetry. However, not many Bengali authors have been found to be experimenting with the narrative forms. As far as themes and content of fiction were concerned the Bengali authors abundantly experimented; however, the same cannot be said in terms of the narrative style. For example, a widely accepted style like the magic realism was quite underexplored in the oeuvre of Bengali literature. Even when it is employed, as we can see in the works of Nabarun Bhattacharya, it seldom complicates the story-telling by bringing together historiography and magic realism. Rabisankar Bal precisely does that in his work, the *Dozakhnama or Conversations in Hell* (2010). Bal dexterously handles two different characters, namely Ghalib and Manto, belonging to two separate time periods, and retells the stories of immense historical significance. His narration provides a unique lens to look at the non-linearity of time and synthesizes discrete historical events of India that happened ninety years apart, namely in 1857 and 1947. This paper analyses some salient features of magic realism and shows how Rabisankar Bal appropriates them in his novel *Dozakhnama,* and in the process, creates a unique work that seldom finds any parallel in the literary realm of Bengali Literature.

***Keywords:*** Magic realism, Bengali literature, Ghalib, Manto, historiography.

On his quest to create the 'opposite utopia', Marquez in his Nobel prize speech had hoped for a 'second opportunity on earth', perhaps to recreate or rewrite history to make amends for what has been lost in the lapses of dictatorial time. The literary identity of Marquez's fiction becomes attached to Magic Realism irrevocably and in the field of world literature, Latin American literature becomes synonymous with Magic Realism. Despite the popular association of the term 'Magic Realism' with Latin America, it originated in Weimer Germany, a term officially introduced by Franz Roh in 1925, in the domain of art. Roh insisted upon devising a new category of art that would be emancipated from the strict guidelines of realism. In his book *After Expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting* (1925), Roh expressed his concern about the pertinent need of revising the representational politics of art to appropriate an objective understanding of life and art (Gale 11). In literature, there were traces of magic realism in various ages, but the narrative style of intertwining of the realist and the elements of fantastic was associated with Latin American writings, where Alejo Carpentier was taken to be a pioneer in the 1940s. It was a trend as identified by Angel Flores who realised that simplistic categorisation of genres or styles that defines reality was not quite possible in the ever-changing dynamics of Latin America. In her essay "Magical Realism in Spanish America" she writes:

> …I shall endeavour to suggest the general trend in which these and other brilliant contemporary Latin American novelists and short story writers are located. This trend I term "magical realism". (111)

The trend however has been ever elusive and inconsistent in its own way, carefully evading closure, yet ascribing to the art of recreating history of varied places. According to Julian Barnes, fiction born out of the quarters of magic realism, "…moves back and forth…between the disparate worlds of what we might call the historical and the imaginary…Contradictions stand face to face, oxymoron march in locked step…and politics collide with fantasy" (Zamora and Faris 1). There cannot be any one-

dimensional definition of magic realism because it negates fixities and consistencies of representation altogether. It has often been marked for its blurred departure from the realms of realism to that of the magical. However, to understand magic realism, the best way is to approach it from its point of deviations from realism. While for realism, the possibility to represent the world as an ideological singular version stands tall, magic realism celebrates plurality, negates universal metaphors of representation and invites the readers to challenge the text in and out. The purpose of the former is to induce stability while the later attempts to disrupt the construct of reality altogether. Amidst the web of contradictions, something that is found to be common in the realm of magic realism across the world is that it is always born out of a prolonged crisis of an incurable past. It is often associated with the colonial history that has obliterated the regional histories over centuries. Also, in certain cases the political instability of countries has been manifested in works of magic realism. It has the ability of representing the most haunting and horrible things in an objective way by devising a distance between the reader and the text. The politics of such representation is closely intertwined with non-western socio-cultural structures and deeply values the regional aesthetics. Although the most reliable non-western representations could be found in myths, local legends, oral traditions, and community practices, an unprompted recognition of them was scarcely facilitated within the western cultural paradigm.

> …primary narrative investment may be in myths, legends, rituals- that is, in collective (sometimes oral and performative, as well as written) practices that bind communities together. (Zamora and Faris 3)

Often the history that is in the process of being rewritten is most specifically channelized through non-western teleology. So, one may say that magic realism is also used as an instrument of constructing social realism, an offbeat paradigm of history hitherto unacknowledged by the colonial school of history. With the rise of postcolonial studies, magic realist authors have been

recognised as masters of both the categories of literature as well as history. Indian postcolonial critic Ramchandra Guha admits the dynamics of 'itihasa', an absolutely regional construct of history, much needed to understand postcolonial India in *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (2007). Guha's reading suggests the irrelevance of a universal acceptance of the westernised idea of world history and also advances towards pronouncing the recurring necessity of adapting the regional historiographies (23). As a country with a colonial past, India too has its own share of fissures within the larger construct of its national history. Of course, the representation of it, therefore, is a huge challenge. Several authors have succeeded in presenting the chronological history of India; however, the representational methodology had been western and hence dependent upon facts. The unresolved knots have therefore remained as they were in the colonial times, ignored and unacknowledged. It is for a different kind of representation of Indian history that the need of a counter discourse was sought after, although with little success initially. Almost three decades after the Indian independence, it was in 1981 that Salman Rushdie explored the trope of magic realism and wrote *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's text challenged the existing pattern of the reading of Indian history and allowed the readers to look for alternatives, to explore and even accept the possible counter histories.

Magic realism as a genre has been appropriated by several authors across the globe, and almost each of them has risen from a point of crisis: be it historical, political, religious or social. The aftermath of partition in India is analysed as one of the most violent moments of socio-political history which was also the final blow to its colonial past. However, there are multiple narratives of discontent in the Indian subcontinent involving the natives and their protests against the colonial power which though documented, was seldom highlighted. To begin with, the first organized and armed resistance against the advances of British colonisers in India was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. It is also considered as the first independence movement

of India where the Indian soldiers collectively fought against the East India Company with the intention of reinstating Bahadur Shah Zafar at his throne in Delhi. Robert McNamra in his article, "The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857" writes that when the struggle for independence gained momentum, the mutiny was glorified as the 'early battle of independence' (1). There has been historical as well as literary representations of the battle of 1857. *The Sepoy Mutiny* (1973) by V.A. Stuart, *Mutiny Memoirs: Being Personal Reminiscences of The Great Revolt of 1857* (2009) by Alfred Robert Davidson MacKenzie and several historical narratives have successfully presented before the readers a chronological account of facts. However, most of these accounts were from people belonging to the British East India Company and it is quite an accepted fact that history indeed is the chronicle of the victor, a timeless anecdote popularly credited to former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. However, then the structure of history does by no means hold the potential of being the ultimate metanarrative. Of course, the advent of postmodernism after the World War II had already pronounced the ultimate collapse of the metanarratives of the world leaving no room for their constructed grandness. Rather the call of the hour was to acknowledge and accept the micro narratives which appeared far more useful in understanding the world which was abruptly transformed as an aftermath of the Second World War. So, the micro narratives could be found in endless things which were formerly not considered of much importance (Lyotard 2).

In the context of Indian struggle of independence, chronological history often ignored the subjective history that accommodates lived experience. Hence, a lot is often lost and in not accounted for in the process of history making. Also, the coloniser's documentation allows the possibility of select facts being carefully removed. A comparative analysis of the coloniser's history and the local subjective history constructed by oral accounts of lived experience often reveals the fissures within the representation itself. The available history most often has been the account of the coloniser where the voices of the colonised are barely considered. From the very beginning of

human civilization, literature has been considered as an important instrument of documentation and several literary texts have been marked for its authentic or semi-authentic capture of the reality concerned, even often allowing room for plural readings. Therefore, there remains a possibility that regional literature can function as effectively as history, giving voice to the colonised.

History by no means should be separated from its cultural identity; however, it has been observed that the historical documents are bereft of it, especially when it's sourced from the colonial quarters. So, the native authors have been found locating their histories elsewhere, in genres like magic realism that twirls between the reality of the coloniser and that of the colonised. It is a literary way to rediscover and recreate the past, to unearth stories and images, symbols and metaphors of the space concerned to which western idea of history has not been able to do much justice. In the realm of postcolonialism, magic realism is extremely crucial for it not only limits itself to the historiography of colonialism but also addresses issues such as displacement, cultural distortions and erasure of marginal experiences. According to Elleke Boehmer the association of postcolonialism and magic realism is of utmost importance:

> Drawing on the special effects of magic realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement…[T]hey combine the supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent societies which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. Magic effects, therefore, are used to indict the follies of both empire and its aftermath. (235)

The prolonged distortion of history is one of the many reasons that postcolonial authors have sought refuge in genre of magic realism. In this context, Stephen Slemon's assertion needs mentioning. Although his primary emphasis rests on

postmodernism, he allows himself to extend his argument by considering Bakhtin's idea of dialogic discourse and suggests three ways in which postcolonialism can be appropriated by the genre of magic realism. First, magic realism has a dual narrative structure which allows the reader to have a wider spectrum of themes accommodating the perspectives of the colonised people and of the coloniser. Second, it allows the text to unveil the fissures and representational gaps that usually exists in a complex postcolonial situation. And third, magic realism dispenses certain ways in which the interstices of cultural representations in a postcolonial situation can be revived by supporting the voices of the forgotten and ignored marginal colonised. In postcolonial texts which plays upon the trope of magic realism, there exists a narrative tension at the core of the text between the real and the magical as a result of incorporating multiple voices, each holding on to its particularities, often overlapping each other's voices and blurring the distinctions at times (410).

It is in this interplay of real and the magical that a Bengali writer has been found to have woven a tale of history across centuries of human civilization. Rabisankar Bal, a journalist turned author has penned a novel titled *Dozakhnama or Conversations in Hell* (2010) where he has played with the time and history of the Indian subcontinent. Although the novel has been written in Bengali, it has been translated in English by Arunava Sinha to cater to a wider audience across the subcontinent and beyond. In the novel, Bal has further triggered the discord between the ideas of *itihasa* and history which becomes only too alive in his novel for which he has been awarded with the *Bankim Puroskar* in 2011 which is the highest literary award given by the Government of West Bengal in memory of the nineteenth century Bengali literary stalwart Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

Bengali literature has championed various genres and has timelessly displayed an inclination towards the representation of the social reality. Several Bengali classics have been marked because of their regional finesse in representing

Bengal and its socio-cultural nuances. Historical fiction writers like Saradindu Bandyopadhyay or authors like Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay have been much appreciated for their socio-cultural novels. In the domain of Bengali literature, however, a shift has been observed in the contemporary period. Although realist fiction is still in vogue, kept much alive by the writers like Prachet Gupta, Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay and many, alternative fiction has also started appearing. The publication of Rabisankar Bal's Dozakhnama has challenged the existing literary styles of Bengal and has presented before the readers a literary canvas too huge and complex for a pleasure read. Yet, the disturbance has been sensational and alluring as the novel plays with history in a dangerously transgressive way, disrupting familiarity and comfort for the readers.

The stark distinction between history and poetry, as made by Aristotle in *Poetics* asserted that while history recorded what has happened, poetry foretells the things that might happen (6). In the later period, in select contexts 'poetry' could be interchanged with other literary genres. However, there has always been a distinct difference between the roles and responsibilities of the poet and the historian. While the historian is only allowed to deal with date, time and event without the slightest room for imagination, the poet is comparatively allowed a dynamic space for exercising his or her creative faculties.

Bal begins his work by challenging this concept and takes as his protagonists, his working historians, two poets from two different centuries. The first one is Mirza Ghalib (1797-1869), the sixteenth century poet from the Mughal era and the second one is the infamous Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), the rebel writer of twentieth century. Bal infuses into the story the fine trope of time travelling, only with a small twist, that is the medium of travel here, is death. It is from their respective graves that the two authors converse across the centuries about episodes of history and chronicles of destruction. Bal invites the readers to perceive history as framed by two literary craftsmen.

Moving across centuries within the confines of a text is a challenge for any author but Rabisankar Bal's wife Seema Bal says, "he was always fond of questioning time and space for he believed that they could not be defined in terms of their specificity. What matters is how they contribute to shape the greater picture of human civilisation" (Seema Bal Interview). Although magic realism as a genre has not been widely practiced in the literary spheres of Bengal except in the works of select authors such as Nabarun Bhattacharya and Jibanananda Das. Bangladeshi authors such as Syed Waliullah, Akhteruzzaman Elias have also worked with this genre while representing the grotesqueness of human existence in their respective works of fiction.

The novel *Dozakhnama* chronicles the personal histories of both the writers and the socio-political histories of their corresponding times. There is a linear narrative with which the novel begins to unfold itself, only to quickly engage into multiple *dastans* or stories in order to completely do away with the slightest possibility of a unidimensional textual frame. We are introduced to a journalist who visits Lucknow to conduct research on the courtesans of the old city and meets a feeble old man named Farid Mian in a mansion which is falling apart. Farid Mian claims to be a writer himself and gives him a manuscript written by none other than Saadat Hasan Manto in Urdu as he is no longer able to live with the burden of an unpublished manuscript. An interesting comment is added at this point by a minor character, a servant of the house, who inhabits the same mansion that Farid Mian is mad, "Don't you know Mian went mad once?...Mian will go mad again…He will start talking to himself again…Whenever anyone talks about stories…" (Bal 7).

Although exploration of the trope of madness has been often found in literature, sometimes psychological instability also allows a certain freedom from commitment to accuracy and veracity. The journalist receives the manuscript, and the author invites the readers to delve deeper into the web of complications from the moment the manuscript is opened. First, the termite eaten old manuscript is completely written in Urdu, the

language not known to the author, second it is only Farid Mian who is confirming that the text has been written by Manto, a source that cannot be verified by any means. Also, Farid Mian himself says that even the handwriting does not match that of Manto's as he had consulted with many people regarding the manuscript. So, even before the formal inception of the novel within the novel, the author gives his characters and the readers to make a choice of consciously or willingly suspending their disbelief (Coleridge 208) for the sake of the text and the pleasure that might come out of it or to abandon the matter altogether. Mian extends this a little further and conveys to the journalist that although he might look at Manto's work as a novel, but it is a dastan after all. The difference as he suggests is that "In a dastan the story never ends, whereas a novel has a beginning and an end" (8). Through Mian's affirmations, Bal tries to release the author of the manuscript from all the possible responsibilities that the readers might subject him to, holding him as the omniscient signifier of the text. As Barthes suggests in *Death of an Author* that for the growth of the modern text, the author must disappear, the author must die.

> Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to' close the writing. (Barthes 147)

The structure of a story within a story had been appropriated by authors like Italo Calvino whose *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979) is famous for its frame structure. Bal slowly leaves the thread of his narrative to burgeon into a Chinese box structure where multiple stories intersect with each other without the faintest ambition for an absolute closure, leaving the readers as perplexed as ever. In an interview, Bal had acknowledged his personal aversion towards linear narratives. It was very important for him to deconstruct it and reject it as he believed that mere characterisation and a supporting plotline limits the prospect of the text altogether. At the same time, he did value the human hunger for stories and that is probably one

of the reasons that makes it a point to never deny that to his readers (Bal Interview).

Although not many biographical accounts of Rabisankar Bal are available, but as per the account of the author himself, it was while writing a novel titled *Chayaputuler Khela* (2007) that he first brought Mirza Ghalib as a part of it, not as a great poet but as an unfortunate victim of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 bereft of financial resources, friends and peers. It was during this period that Bal was intensely reading Ghalib, his biographies, verses and letters and somehow, he could identify with the court poet. Like Ghalib's world changed rapidly with the advent of the colonial regime, Bal was also able to perceive how his own city, Kolkata, formerly Calcutta was transforming abruptly.

While coming to terms with the degeneration of the city in which he has lived since childhood, Bal rediscovered Ghalib and started writing a novel on him. Probably he would have been able to finish it, only if he had not started reading Saadat Hasan Manto all over again. The apparent diversion however worked in his favour for he found out from Manto's biography that Ghalib was one of Manto's favourite poets and he had written a screenplay on Ghalib's life for an Indian film production which had also received a national award. Bharat Bhushan had played the role of Mirza Ghalib and the character of his courtesan lover was played by Suraiya. Unfortunately, by the time the film was released, Manto had left India for Pakistan. The biographical reading of both Manto and Ghalib motivated the author to think of a work of fiction which would bring together both the writers across centuries. He says, "It came to my mind, if it was possible to think of something like, as if Manto is writing a novel about Ghalib and I am writing it for him. So, whatever I had written so far, had to be abandoned" (my trans.; Bal Interview).

In her account on the author, Seema Bal has also affirmed that her husband, Rabisankar Bal was passionately involved into the life-sketches of Mirza Ghalib and Saadat Hasan Manto (Seema Bal Interview). There is a possibility that this

involvement went to an extreme level during his stay at a rehabilitation centre to cure him of his excessive drinking problem. Rabisankar Bal had spoken about it openly, "It was during my stay at the rehabilitation centre that I came to understand the loneliness of authors like Ghalib and Manto, through my lived experience" (my trans.; Bal Interview).

This honesty of Rabisankar Bal however does not make any space for an omniscient author in his novel, *Dozakhnama*. Rather, he blurs the idea of the author altogether from the paradigm of his fictional narrative. The decisive disappearance of an omnipotent author allows a larger space for the characters to indulge into dialogues across several layers, involving life, death and several other things. Spirits and supernatural beings inhabiting in a real setting is not uncommon in the sphere of magic realism. Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) is one of the earliest works of the genre that initiates a literary communication between the living and the dead. Marquez too does similar things in his timeless tale of the Buendia family in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967).

> The gypsy was inclined to stay in the town. He really had been through death, but he had returned because he could not bear the solitude. (16)

The association of death and magic realism implores us to question the degree to which it is significant or necessary. Is death something that allows a fairer chance of representing timelessness? The obliteration of the chronological frame of time is guaranteed in the magical representation of death. The first feature that helps in identifying Rabisankar Bal's *Dozakhnama* is his interplay between death, life and of course time. Bal carefully dismantles the barrier between the living and the dead from the moment the journalist decides to carry forward the manuscript ascribed to Manto and eventually publish it. First, he finds his Urdu instructor in a woman named Tabassum Mirza and embarks on a journey to translate the manuscript, to complete the unfinished task of Manto. Gradually he gives it up and suggests that Tabassum read it for him, and he copy the words

on paper, in order to hasten the process of completing the task. Like Plato's statement that art is twice removed from reality (*The Republic* Book X), here the authors get removed in a similar way, for every single person who becomes a part of the novel, writes it, even tries to rewrite it through translation, "What you will read hereafter is the translation of Manto's novel about Mirza Ghalib. Tabassum and I might return now and then" (12).

Second, as the novel unfolds, the journalist discovers that the date under the signature of Manto at the bottom of the introduction is the day on which he had died and argues with his Urdu teacher if it was a work of forgery. Her response, however, triggers the contest of ideas involving the classical position of author or the relationship between the author and the text altogether once again, as her casual remark enthrals with the deep understanding of meaninglessness that pervades human existence.

> Do you know for sure that everything Manto wrote was really his? Maybe someone just claimed they were written by Manto. Just the way I'm telling the story and you're writing it. You, I, Mirza Ghalib — one day none of us will be here, not even our names, but the stories will still be floating about. That's not insignificant, is it? Now come on, start writing. (14)

As the journalist begins to write or rewrite Manto's novel, he conjures the author in a different language, thus leaving the readers wonder, how much has already been lost in translation. Similarly, Manto too, conjures Mirza Ghalib from his grave so that they may begin their conversation. In his conjuring, one can also see how beautifully the personal histories of both Manto and Ghalib is in the process of being weaved. The reader is however made to wonder, exactly who is the conjurer and what exactly is being conjured, only to accept the impossibility of finding a single answer resembling a closure. Although writing is a personal act, however it also allows the author a chance to evade the omniscient position that comes traditionally with authorship. In *Dozakhnama,* through the multiplicity of voices,

the author makes his escape, leaving the text at the mercy of the readers but not altogether erasing his literary trace in the work. In *Intimations*, writes Zadie Smith, "Talking to yourself can be useful. And writing means being overheard" (xii). Borrowing the idea of Smith, one can then say that the multiple voices which have spoken throughout the novel has been betrayed by the author Bal as he becomes the agent who allows the larger body of readers to overhear the conversation of the dead and the alive. Nevertheless, the act of overhearing too is no less participatory and thus the conjuring of the novel becomes an absolute act of collective participation.

The strange intertwining of multiple histories, a prominent feature of magic realism is beautifully crafted by Bal which makes *Dozakhnama* a classic tale of time and timelessness written in Bengali. Critics have considered the genre of magic realism to be unique in its feature of being able to be understood from multiple critical and theoretical standpoints. It is primarily because the genre precisely does not belong to a single era and therefore does not adhere to any particular critical school of theory. The ease with which magic realist fiction toys with the ideas of postmodernism, postcolonialism and heteroglossia confirms that as a narrative structure it is 'transgressive and subversive' in its own right (Bowers 66). In this context, Zamora and Faris writes:

> Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-between-ness, their all at onceness encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures… (6)

Therefore, it can be said that the subversion of normative history is possibly best appropriated by the genre of magic realism. Bal plays with two different kinds of history in his novel. The first one is the chronological history of Indian independence and the second that of the personal histories of two different poets across centuries. The author adjures promiscuously prominent similarities between Manto and Ghalib. Of the many shared

behavioural traits between the two, drinking was the most visible. They were both fascinated by the company of fallen women and responded to them in unorthodox ways. Their love for literature bound them to their respective fates as with that also came their disgust for conformism and the zest to stand out in the crowd. Also, they both had their share of humiliation in their respective eras. While Ghalib could not be Manto's guide in reality, as a classic predecessor, the later deeply adored him. In the novel *Dozakhnama*, Bal often blurs the centuries in between and implores the readers to imagine if Manto was the refreshed memory of Ghalib or to question if Manto's voice was that of time oscillating between the ages in the cycle of decay.

The history of Indian independence has been discussed by multiple historians and most of them readily offers informative facts. Their documentations are mostly correct but they do not prefer to accommodate subjectivity in their approach in order to maintain their classical loyalty to the subject. Ghalib's story as he casually tells Manto offers a different kind of socio-political history that comes along with his detailed personal account. As time does not move chronologically in the novel, the readers are made to understand that Ghalib's time had come to an end with the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, "…I wasn't asleep, I had merely shut my eyes. I didn't feel upto talking. After 1857 I didn't feel the urge to stay awake…" (Bal 89).

The effect of the social epoch on one's personal life is something that magic realism portrays in a most unusual manner. The subversion of chronology, as one may say, begins with the dialogues exchanged between Ghalib and Manto. The fearful predictions of history as initiated by Ghalib in the novel is actually an attack on the colonial regime which wrecked the Indian sub-continent for centuries. We do not conclude that the novel has the trait of being identified as a text with political merit; nevertheless, it bears a political commentary on the colonial history of India.

Magic realist fiction also points at the impossibility of absolute representation and in its acceptance of fragmented and intertwined versions of reality, it is also possible to anticipate the crisis that triggers such literary creations. Now, what crisis did Bal have in mind when he intended to write *Dozakhnama* was never directly mentioned by him; but in an interview he had confessed that his sympathies for the marginal people had always stayed along. In his understanding, both Ghalib and Manto, were poets of the margins: they were neglected by the institutions, penalised and disrespected in their own times. Bal goes beyond their humiliations and celebrates their works and creativity. Hence, in spite of Ghalib's reckless drinking and womanising as confessed by the character himself in the novel, the readers seldom condemn him. Bal deconstructs a larger than life image often bestowed upon the authors as bearers of moral and social obligations, through the portrayal of Manto; the readers too are able to look beyond the community's standardized image of Manto as a drunkard, and as a writer of obscene things.

As a journalist himself, Bal also takes into account the crisis of Urdu language in the Indian subcontinent. Under the oppressive colonial regime, the language which resided at the core of Islamic culture in India slowly corroded away. The attention which Urdu as a language had received in the eighteenth century waned away in nineteenth century for various reasons. The rise of Anglicist educational model in India overshadowed the existing models of Oriental education and along with it languages such as Urdu, Persian and Sanskrit slowly became 'subjects of lesser importance' (Sarma 63). Through Ghalib's personal account the readers come to understand the socio-cultural shift which primarily disturbed the consistent status of a language and all that has been associated with it. There was an erosion in the Urdu culture due to the expansion of colonial power. The final proverbial nail in the coffin was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 that saw the fall of Urdu speaking Islamic aristocracy in Delhi and its neighbouring areas.

It was not that the Urdu as a language disappeared completely from the country; but its former grandeur and usage were heavily affected. The fall of the Mughal Empire marked by the exile of the last Nawab Bahadur Shah Zafar had made Ghalib realise that the future of Delhi was doomed and with that all that it stood for. A language lives and is also preserved at the centre of a culture. Ghalib's depiction of the wreck caused by the colonial army in Delhi during the Sepoy Mutiny in his personal letters not only provides an alternative history of the first war of independence where personal losses are taken into account along with the morbid degeneration of a culture. Again, with the advent of the Indian independence in 1947, which also witnessed the partition of the sub-continent based on religion, we see how Manto was worried about the future of the Urdu language in India. He was anxious if Urdu would become extinct in India and as a premonition, over the years, it has been partially true. Urdu continued to lose its importance through the subsequent years. Bal identified this act of marginalising of a language as nothing less than linguistic violence that has contributed to the destruction of a linguistic lineage.

Through Ghalib's reminiscences of Delhi, one can travel back to the past for his works are rich in poetic essence and faithfully reflects the *tehzeeb* or the culture of the era to which the poet belonged. Manto's recklessness with fiction, on the contrary, lays threadbare the raw and gory pictures of the partition of 1947 and beyond. Manto's fascination towards the underbellies of the society triggered his literary whim from an early period of his life. His choice of subject was most of the time disturbing and often unacceptable for many of his readers. He often had to face legal trials for his writings. The condition of writers across ages disturbed Bal. Their helplessness, vulnerability, and abuse at the hand of political oppression triggered his imagination. In his exclusive interview to Jahid Sohag he had confirmed that it was the helplessness of the two creative artists, Ghalib and Manto that had moved him. He had wanted to understand how both were victims of the political centre of power, each in his own time and how they individually

confronted their respective oppressive power structures. Behind this, Bal also had his own intention of probing closer into this vicious game of power so that he may be able to deal with his own demons, the real ones of his contemporary times which engulfs the authors in varied ways but also without such institutions it is not possible for them to survive (Bal Interview) [Self Translation]. In the interview, his careful choice of words further suggests his continuing displeasure with the contemporary politics which marginalises the authors. His own dissatisfaction with his reality also contributed towards his literary engagement with the history of the two fellow artists.

The condition of authors as perceived by Bal invites us to revisit the question of art as a commodity, a perpetual debate which has been ongoing since the 1930s. According to Gyorgy Markus, as he writes in his essay "Walter Benjamin or The Commodity as Phantasmagoria" that former authors such as Adorno and Brecht had asserted that the form of the commodity "not only affects its potential recipients and fundamentally influences its content, but also determines the fate of art under capitalism" (3). At the same time, it was more important to perceive the conditions of modern capitalism as it would directly influence art as specific marketable products (3). Rabisankar Bal is a product of this line of capitalist progression where an author cannot evade the loop of capitalism in order to ensure his survival as an author. The same crisis was faced by Mirza Ghalib and Manto as well. In spite of both being brilliant in their respective works, both of them dealt with severe financial difficulties throughout their lives. Ghalib had to constantly borrow from his friends and he only became the court poet towards the end of his life. But of course, his lifestyle was also quite extravagant owing to his title of 'Mirza'. Surrounded by friends and followers, he would often indulge in gambling too along with constant drinking, "The gambling session was in full swing in my devil's chamber that day. We used to gamble with dice. Several rich businessmen were present. Luck was running my way…" (189). However, to maintain this kind of a lifestyle, he had to depend on royalty and nobilities, many of

whom he secretly despised and who also did not support him all the time, "I was preparing myself mentally…It was the behaviour of Aminuddin Sahib, the nawab of Loharu, which surprised me the most. How friendly we used to be. And now he disowned me completely. His brother Ziauddin also moved away" (190).

Manto too had his share of difficulties in surviving as an independent voice in a world that was in transition. He started as a writer in his early days for a regional magazine and over the years made his way to the Bombay film industry as a screenplay writer. He could live with a meagre salary but could not abide by the regular rules of working, something that Bal recreated in his novel through the character itself: "I won't take more than sixty. But I can't follow a routine. I'll come to work as I please. All you want is that the magazine should be published on time, right?" (184). Manto's disregard for conventions made him infamous. When Bombay did not suit him well, for a brief period of time he tried his luck at Delhi where he found work at the radio station. However, even that did not work for him and he left the job.

> In 1941 I went to Delhi with a job at the radio station. The salary was a hundred and fifty rupees a month. But I couldn't survive more than a year and a half. Government jobs weren't for me, Mirza Sahib. (185)

Rabisankar Bal makes his protagonists tell their stories of individual rise and fall and excites the readers to the taste of biographical details, mostly authentic, and yet leaves room enough for multiple realities to question historiography itself as they also talk about civilisations in transition. Bal's mockery of institutionalized history takes the penultimate form through the tongue-in-cheek humour of Ghalib as the court poet address history as food for termites, "History is for termites to destroy, isn't that so, Manto bhai?" (205). Bal's conscious disregard for the metanarrative of history becomes evident in his novel as he engages in strengthening of the bridge between postmodernism and magic realism in the context of Bengali literature. History in

the Indian subcontinent has long been monopolised by colonial institutions and hence they tend to cater to a monolithic reading of the incidents. Bal's revision of the history can only come through magic realism as it opens up several possibilities of interpretations of the same events. For Bal, magic realism is the technique to engage with the genre by constantly playing upon the idea of reality and illusion. Works of magic realism allows us to understand how the alternate appropriations of reality which often appears delusional also manifests reality, nevertheless. From the perspective of Bowlers, Rabisankar Bal's *Dozakhnama* can surely be read as a work of postcolonial magic realism, one of the first of its kind in the literary sphere of Bengali literature.

> The majority of magical realist writing can be described as postcolonial. That is to say much of it is set in a postcolonial context and written from a postcolonial perspective that challenges the assumptions of an authoritative colonialist attitude. (Bowlers 95)

The evolution of Bengali literature that could be noticed from the early decades of twentieth century consistently used realism as a favoured form of literary style and mostly social issues were taken into account as major themes. A similar pattern followed in the awake of the postcolonial era with select variations in the works of authors such as Nabarun Bhattacharya whose work *Herbert* remains a classic in its own merit. Although it has been suggested by select critics that Nabarun was the harbinger of magic realism in Bengali literature, but Rabisankar Bal's work offers an absolutely fascinating experience of understanding magic realism in the context of contemporary Bengal. The language that he uses easily travels across centuries and it overpowers the readers to an extent where the gaps between Urdu and Bengali culture is blurred. In twists and turns of the work of fiction, Bal plays with the characters and the readers at the same time, making the work elusive as ever.

Who's telling stories here?

> Oh I come here every day. And I inevitably find a dastango. There he is. (273)

A Dastango, a storyteller, never really finishes the story and only travels from one tale to another. Towards the end of the novel, the voice of Bal comes alive through the character of a journalist and he suggests the impossibility of a closure in such a narrative. He writes: "We have crossed successive rings of fire on this journey…My search for them is propelling me towards a new novel" (278). In his suggestion of travelling to one narrative from the other, he becomes a dastango himself, probably one of the last torchbearers of a disappearing art of storytelling. In his exhibition of the past, Bal reveals the fissures within the past itself and the impossibility of a holistic exhibition altogether. He consciously avoids to delve into the narrative styles explored in Latin American or any other European literary rendition of magic realism and attempts to present a novel work of Bengali magic realism, by the means of his choice of theme and the treatment of narrative structure. Bal's text makes room for the literary junctions of uncertainty and thus changes the course of the novel; at any moment, appears a new story teller with a new story, where Ghalib and Manto are sometimes present or even absent. In this negation of the historical absolute is born the new fiction of Bengali magic realism and Bal remains its pioneering advocate.

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